

# **Organizing a Bicycle Field Trip for Children**

Bicycle trips, whether an all-day outing, an overnight camping trip, or a long-distance tour can be great fun for any young person. While it is likely that most children will only be involved in day trips of five to fifteen miles, it is possible for a child to travel much farther on a bike. A number of young children have accomplished cross-country tours; many more have bicycled hundreds of miles with their parents or as a part of an organized group. This type of travel can provide a rewarding challenge to a person of any age.

## **Day Trips**

The first trip by bicycle should be a short one through familiar territory. Five to ten miles is a good distance. A ride along a well-constructed recreation bike path would be ideal, but this type of facility is not available in all areas. Other possibilities include roads within a nearby recreation area, a ride to a local park or historic site, or a loop trip along lightly traveled rural roads. The time of day or day of week often has a bearing on the amount of traffic which will be encountered. This should be taken into consideration in planning any trip. For instance, roads within a nearby recreation area would be more lightly traveled during the week than on weekends; roads in a park area are sometimes closed to motorized traffic on weekends; a historic site near a downtown area might be more accessible on a Sunday when traffic is lighter. Maps showing the average daily traffic volumes for rural roads are available from the Department of Transportation and are useful in planning rides in the country. The selected route should be tested before the day of the group ride to pinpoint potential problems, as well as to locate rest stops and points of interest.

As even the slowest rider can easily cover three to five miles in an hour, the "bike-hike" will end too quickly unless other recreation activities are included. These activities will vary according to the location of the trip. Picnics are always fun as are swimming, volleyball and softball. Historic sites often offer informative tours, while nature walks are a feature of many recreation areas. If the trip is along a bike path or road closed to motor vehicles, a scavenger hunt (limited to small, easy to carry items) could be conducted. Bicycle field events such as slow races, relays, etc. could be conducted at a destination which includes a large paved area.

Once the outing has been planned, the bicycles should be inspected to be sure they are in good condition. Check tire pressure and brake adjustment; tighten nuts and bolts, seat post and handlebars. Most importantly, be sure the bicycle fits the child. A child will often borrow a bicycle which is not the proper size. If the bicycle is too large it will be hard to control while a bicycle which is too small or whose seat is too low doesn't allow for proper extension of the leg, causing the rider to fatigue more easily.

Bicycle helmets should be required for all riders to ensure their safety on the trip. Check to be sure that the helmet fits the child properly. The helmet should fit snugly, but not be tight. Interchangeable sizing pads make adjustments easy. The helmet should sit squarely on the head and should not rock either side to side or back to front.

There are a few items which each child should carry on any trip which takes them more than a few miles from home. A small tool kit with tire irons and a tire patching kit are necessities. Of course, the child should have prior experience in using these items. Water or juice and some kind of snack are nice to have. A light jacket for early morning or late afternoon is also useful. Someone in the group should carry a first aid kit as accidents are bound to happen. A front carrier, seat pack, back pack or bicycle rack should be used to carry these items as it is very dangerous to carry objects in the hands.

Finally, be sure that the children understand the fundamental rules of the road. The bicycle is a vehicle and should be ridden on the right-hand side of the road, in the same direction as other traffic. Riders should ride single file, even though it is tempting to ride beside a friend to talk. A bicyclist should stop at stop signs and stop lights, signal all turns, and should never ride the wrong way down a one-way street. On the road, ride in small groups so that a motorist can pass safely. If a line of cars forms behind a group, the bicyclists should get off the road to let them pass.

When riding on public roads, be sure that there is at least one adult supervisor for each ten children. There should never be fewer than two supervisors, however. One should ride in the front to be sure that the group follows the planned route, while the other one should ride at the back to be sure there aren't any stragglers and to take care of any breakdowns which might occur. A support vehicle or "sag-wagon" might be used to cover any emergency situations which might occur.

On the appointed day, assemble the children and their bikes at the starting point. Review the rules of the road and quickly spot check the bicycles to be sure that no serious problems exist. Set a moderate pace for the ride and keep the group tight. Cyclists spread out along several miles of the route will annoy motorists and make it difficult for leaders to watch the children and make sure they are riding responsibly. The forward leader might occasionally drop back to check the riding techniques of the children or to comment if a child is not following proper procedures.

Stop every half an hour or so for a short breather. Don't linger too long, though, or momentum will be lost. Children who are beginning to tire will be reluctant to get going and the "sag-wagon" will be swamped. Gently encourage any who seem to be losing their enthusiasm. The child will gain a great deal of self-esteem by completing the trip.

Above all, be sure the trip is fun. Bicycling should be encouraged as a healthful, energy-efficient form of transportation. A child who doesn't enjoy the trip will be discouraged about traveling by bike.

## **Overnight and Tours**

Longer trips should be attempted only after a bicyclist has proven his or her abilities on a number of day trips. Long daily distances require a great deal of self-discipline and self-motivation. Only well-trained riders on well-maintained bicycles should be encouraged to undertake such trips.

Overnight trips usually cover forty to eighty miles, while overall tour distances are limited only by the length of travel time available. While such distances can be covered on any type of bicycle, a 10-speed is preferable. These trips can be either self-sufficient with each rider carrying all of his or her own equipment and sharing the load on communal items such as tools, tents, cook sets and food, or can utilize the services of a support vehicle to carry all this equipment.

Group size is usually held to between eight and twelve participants with at least two adult leaders. More than this number is usually unmanageable, although some groups have included as many as one hundred riders. The group should ride together on several long day trips before the tour to gain the necessary on-road experience. Emergency maneuvers such as the panic stop, controlled swerving to avoid road hazards and returning safely to the road surface after being forced onto the shoulder should be practiced before these outings. It is important that the ages, personalities and capabilities of the group are compatible as stressful situations can arise and require a great deal of cooperation to overcome.

Leaders should be experienced bicycle riders and should have a basic knowledge of bicycle repair, especially for longer trips. No matter how well prepared the equipment is, mechanical problems are bound to occur. Each participant should have experience in repairing flat tires and making minor adjustments so as not to over burden the leaders.

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For more information on bicycle safety on the road or developing safe bicycle riding skills, contact:

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